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# THE REAL INTELLIGENCE FAILURE

*Policymakers treat information in a variety of ways, not all of them respectful of its value or integrity*

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WHEN POLICYMAKERS SET OUT to plot a strategy or critique a policy, intelligence information is one of the tools they use. But the effect of intelligence on their decisions will depend on their willingness to defer to its implications—and interested parties will be pressing attractively argued alternatives. Other factors will also lead a decision-maker to give more or less weight to intelligence: whether the information is congenial or not; whether it is new and exciting or a humdrum repetition of tiresome views; whether the messenger bringing the news is liked or distrusted; and how the information is packaged. Appearances—which may be comparatively frivolous—may outshine the information itself and affect judgments on its value. Or, the policymaker may see past these images to the information and carefully examine its value to his decisions.

The intelligence community—the CIA, National Security Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research in the State Department, and others—exists, first, so that the president and the administration will not be surprised. Beyond that, intelligence has the finer role of enlightening policy. The most sophisticated use of what we know—or what we think we know—is to throw light on the future, to spot opportunities for the United States, to point out perils.

The late scholar Hans Morgenthau once warned us that "the first lesson which the student of international politics must learn and never forget is that the complexities of international affairs make simple solutions and trustworthy prophecies impossible. It is here that the scholar and the charlatan part company." Collecting and analyzing information—indeed, any link in the intelligence chain—provides many opportunities for charlatanship. Morgenthau was right in warning us against trusting easy assumptions about the future, but the attempt to define current reality must also be approached with modesty. The purveyor of intelligence must consciously work to present that reality in an intellectually limpid form, clear in expression and free from the impurities of emotion and ideology.

Of course, the intelligence community is not perfect. When the United States is taken by surprise or a policy is viewed as not working, an intelligence failure (not always further defined) is frequently cited as the cause. Some of these are genuine shortcomings of the process of information collection and analysis. Some of them are understandable, if not excusable, and some of them not.

Terrorist threats, for example, are difficult for anyone to predict. We know that diplomats and certain other individuals are especially vulnerable, and under certain circumstances—when dealing with a particular group or approaching a special date—we can gird ourselves for an attack. Even then, however, control of time and place, along with ruthlessness, gives the advantage to the terrorist. A professional intelligence officer may be dismayed by the failure to predict or to prevent an attack; there is a practical limit to what intelligence can do in this area. Even as we work to avoid this kind of failure, we must become inured to surprise.

There are other kinds of intelligence failures—failures in perception and judgment—and quite a few were apparent in the invasion of the Falkland Islands (Las Malvinas) by Argentina. These failures were shared by all: the British were surprised. The Argentines miscalculated the state of British pluck (not the first time that mistake had been made). The U.S. intelligence community had indications that the Argentines were talking about making this perennial irredentist fantasy become real, but we were surprised too. No one, we thought, could be so irrational, not even Argentine officers looking for an outlet for domestic discontent. The argument that something would be irrational will continue to confound level-headed people. It did so in 1962 when Soviet missiles were found in Cuba, and in 1973 when intelligence officers were surprised by the attack on Israel. Intelligence officers have a special responsibility to understand the volatility of passions, even though they do not share them; *especially* because they do not share them.

The Argentine failure to anticipate British reaction adequately (this seems evident from the generally poor quality of the Argentine troops put ashore in the Falklands) cannot be excused by a need for great haste, as may be the case in other even more impulsive expeditions. It was instead the result of plans being hatched in the narrow confines of a cabal within the government. Such plans are almost certain to suffer from a lack of expert advice and second opinions that

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might improve the scheme or lead to its abandonment. While the members of such a small, furtive group would not willfully draw up a poor design, they may fear that their intentions will be uncovered, or even suspect privately that there are holes in their reasoning and be ashamed should their hands be revealed. This is not just a peculiarity of the Argentines. The need for security in the U.S. government and the quite justified obsession with leaks may lead decision-makers to limit the people and agencies involved, thereby preventing good counsel and balanced assessments from being heard. This seems to have been the case in the decision to mine Nicaraguan harbors. In an article reviewing the first Reagan term [JOURNAL, October], reporter George Gedda writes, "The [Reagan] administration now looks with regret on the decision [to put mines in Nicaraguan waters]; the public reaction was almost uniformly negative and contributed to an erosion of support for overall administration policy toward Nicaragua."

SOMETIMES, HOWEVER, intelligence failures arise despite the constant attention paid to an issue. The U.S. government worried unflaggingly about Maurice Bishop, the prime minister of Grenada, because of his intimacy with the Cubans and the Soviet Union. That concern was further inflamed by the intemperate verbal attacks on the United States made by Bishop and others in his government. Nevertheless, the coup against him was a surprise. The lack of official U.S. representation on Grenada was one reason why we had no feel for the factional opposition rising against Bishop in the New Jewel Movement. A lesson to be drawn from this experience is that unless we have someone stationed in every one of these new island states, we must have a much better method of observing political developments than we had in Grenada. Our launching of an expensive expedition to Grenada in October 1983 demonstrates that we can hardly discount any one place as being of no interest. It makes arguments over which interests are vital and which are not absurdly beside the point.

Of some comfort was our realization that the Cubans had also failed to recognize how wide the rifts in the New Jewel Movement had become and so were unable to save the situation for their protege, Bishop. Of greater satisfaction was Castro's fuming suspicion that his Soviet ally was behind the coup and so contributed to Bishop's death and the invasion. Yet some hardliners in the Reagan administration—who prefer to hyphenate the Soviets and the Cubans, believing them to be a monolithic and crafty apparat—found this difficult to credit at first. They later came to accept it by comfortably shifting to the idea that "the Soviets planned the whole thing."

The U.S. experience on Grenada revealed some other intelligence problems, one being the Case of the Second Campus. We knew that the American medical students were housed in two different spots, one at True Blue, where they were liberated by our forces right away, and another at Grande Anse. These locations were marked on maps and photographs used at CIA briefings. But at a briefing on the flagship the night before the operation, the Grand Anse campus was not mentioned until a CIA officer rose to point out this omission. Despite this last-minute advice, the ground commanders later expressed surprise that there were students at Grand Anse. Once they learned this, of course, they speedily rescued them. We never could discover where the gap existed between what intelligence people knew and what troop commanders had been told. This form of mishap is commonly termed an intelligence failure but is actually a fault somewhere in the communications line, quite possibly a casualty of the haste with which the expedition was conceived and executed.

As soon as the fighting was over, another problem appeared, this time over the number of Cubans on the island. The Cuban construction workers captured by our forces gave conflicting and—some of us thought—exaggerated totals for the number of Cubans on the island. Quick counts of prisoners left the U.S. forces with the uneasy feeling that by no means all of the Cubans had been detained and that they were still a threat. We knew the size of the Grenadian armed forces and militia and realized that few of these had been captured. The Sunday after the invasion, members of the intelligence community found themselves sitting around a table in Washington, assigned with the task of arriving at a meaningful number. We counted Cubans and Grenadians, added and subtracted, and finally concluded that no one remained in the hills.

We found out later that we had been a bit off in our first pre-invasion estimates of Cuban strength, but not seriously so, and our long distance assessment turned out to be correct. The early exaggerations of Cuban troop numbers appear to have been based on those first interviews of prisoners, an overestimate by green troops of the opposition's size, folklore about Cubans in the Sierra Madre, Castro's vainglorious orders that his people should die fighting, and an understandable desire of the field commanders to be sure they had completed their assignment. For a while there were mutterings of another "intelligence failure," but that complaint was soon withdrawn. Eventually, Castro made public his inventory of Cubans in Grenada, plus killed, wounded, and missing. Even then, however, one diehard Cuba-basher in Washington would not accept our assessment: "Castro lies, you know," he commented.

When we distributed the assessment early Monday morning, it ran into some difficulties. I had thought the intelligence community had done a pretty good job, but clearly, in the view of at least some officials, it had a serious fault. That Monday a person with some responsibility in the community, although not himself an intelligence officer, asked to read the assessment. Later, I asked him what he thought of it. I was speechless when he said, "I think it stinks." Knowing him to be close to CIA Director William Casey, I went to see Casey as soon as I could. He was less abrupt, merely finding it "unimaginative." To this day, I cannot be sure why it met with such disapproval among these officials when others, then and later, found it acceptable. In fact, some weeks later a military intelligence officer who had been involved in the operation told us he had found the

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assessment especially useful—he had been saying exactly the same thing but had not been believed until the word came down from Washington.

I CAN ONLY SUPPOSE that the assessment was "unimaginative" because of what it did not say. For example, we could have said that the Cuban construction workers were actually combat troops in disguise, or that the arms found in Grenada were destined to be used to overthrow friendly governments elsewhere in the Caribbean, or that the airfield was not for tourism but for Soviet reconnaissance aircraft. I won't argue the merits of those points; clearly the Soviets and Cubans, either together or separately, would have made the New Jewel Movement a pawn for their adventures in the English-speaking Caribbean. But this instance does demonstrate the gap that currently exists between those who are already sure of what the world looks like and those charged with describing it in an accurate and neutral fashion.

In situations of the sort described above, we may so oversimplify the conflicts involved that we pillory those who disagree with us and exaggerate the virtues of our supporters. Zeal—that emotional investment in a point of view or in a particular strategy—can lead one to shut oneself off from other views, even to ignore obvious information. This probably happens to intelligence officers as much as to policymakers. In October 1984, El Salvador provided an example of passion leading people in our government to overlook an important development in a key area. To the apparent surprise of the U.S. government, President Jose Napoleon Duarte began peace talks with the guerrillas attempting to overthrow his government. The popular desire for peace in El Salvador is well known, as is the Christian Democrats' appreciation of this.

The peace talks had been preceded earlier the same month by an exchange of prisoners between the government and the rebels, which was arranged with the assistance of then Senator Paul Tsongas (D.-Massachusetts). Nevertheless, the Reagan administration seems to have been surprised by Duarte's initiative. According to the *Washington Post*, a congressional source said, "The White House...is so fanatically obsessed with Nicaragua, the Sandinistas, and maintaining the covert war there, they didn't even pay any attention to it." This leads one to believe that Duarte did not consult the administration beforehand but assumed that it would be distressed by his even talking to the guerrillas.

The administration deserves full credit for supporting Duarte and the Christian Democrats in El Salvador against those who would seize power by force and for opposing the Sandinistas' attempts to impose another shabby dictatorship on Nicaragua. Yet, at the same time, the drivers of policy have closed their minds—and have tried to close the minds of others—to alternative ways of reaching solutions in Central America. Even after Grenada, when Nicaragua seemed weak and fearful, when Castro himself had gone pale and stopped his blustering, diplomacy was seen merely as a clever form of pressure and was not used as a means of exploring possible solutions.

This administration considers agreements with Marxist-Leninists to be risky—as indeed they are—but it also finds them too distasteful and inconsistent with its own tough posturing to be a serious option. The administration did not simply fail to give sufficient hearing to a diplomatic strategy; it ideologically shackled its imagination and so was not free to use the informed pragmatism that enables a skilled diplomat to probe for solutions. This goes beyond a mere appreciation of intelligence, but involves the willingness to grasp opportunity and the sense of timing of inspired statemanship.

If an intelligence officer fears that a policymaker will bend assessments until they support policy, a different but also serious peril is that the intelligence officer will try to avoid this by climbing into an ivory tower and pulling his or her own preconceptions in afterwards. Rather, such officers must mix with the policymakers, understand their concerns, and go out into the world where policy is being carried out. Only then can the analyst be sure he or she knows what the problems are. For just this reason, estimates and assessments are shown in draft to the relevant ambassador and staff, to military commanders, and to other intelligence people for comments. This reduces the risk that the study will be irrelevant or address the wrong point. However, neither the ambassador nor the commander is permitted to change the judgments, either to protect themselves or their ambitions. There is a fine line here, and it is easy to drift across it without noticing that the intelligence process is being compromised.

For instance, one confidential study prepared by a military analyst last year contained a discussion of the Salvadoran armed forces' weaknesses. As the result of protests, the study was considerably rewritten. The objections came not from other qualified analysts, but from a senior Defense Department officer who was heavily involved in supporting the armed forces of El Salvador. Not an intelligence failure in itself, this action did erect a flimsy structure that can collapse in just such a flop. It is safer to let a controversial analysis be published and be sure that the vital questions are examined than to suppress discussion because someone is afraid that a pet program may be questioned.

Intelligence assessments should be written by those familiar with an area, and that expertise should not be suppressed. The advantage of familiarity is that one can peer beneath the superficial to find the essential. An example is provided again by the Argentine invasion of the Falklands. Many of our hemispheric neighbors spoke out against the United States for backing Britain instead of Argentina—even for referring to the islands as the Falklands instead of Las Malvinas, as the Argentines insist. Some elements in the U.S. administration wanted us to side with the Argentines, fearing that we would lose credit in the Americas by seeming to back British imperialism rather than an apparently American cause.

But the Argentines—especially the military government—were not as popular as the initial groundswell seemed to show. The outburst of support for them against the British was not universal in Lati

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America, and many who formally backed the Argentines held their noses while doing so. Some of those who supported Argentina most solidly did so out of self-interest—the Americas are seething with old grudges over border problems, and many countries maintain irredentist ambitions. Even Honduras and El Salvador, who face similar Cuban-sponsored dissident movements, have found their cooperation hampered by disputes over pockets of border land.

Some Latin countries, however, agreed with our stand on the Falklands but did not say so publicly. This is part of a common but annoying pattern in Latin politics that is well understood by anyone who has dealt with the region. Americans who oppose a particular U.S. policy in Latin America will triumphantly point out that this or that government to the south has attacked the policy. But this is misleading, for not infrequently, the leader of that government has only recently assured Washington that he agrees entirely with what the United States is doing. At the same time, however, he cautions, "Of course, you understand I can't come right out and say so, you know." The maintenance of genteel relations with that government requires that Washington remain mum about those assurances.

ONE SHOULD DISTINGUISH between such superficial opposition to U.S. policies and actual disagreement. The analyst may sometimes find it helpful to fold some history into his assessment to make the point clear. The example of Mexican opposition to U.S. policy toward Nicaragua illustrates both this type of situation and the impatience with which administration hard-liners greet lessons from the history books. Mexico has consistently followed a policy of nonintervention in international affairs, coupled with a stand in favor of self-determination. As the reader has undoubtedly guessed, the principles stem from past experiences with the United States. A Mexican president who violates these principles in order to support the United States would find himself in an indefensible situation before the Mexican public. Mexico's past support of the Sandinistas and lack of backing for the Salvadoran government (it has lent some support to the guerrillas) rest on these two principles, particularly on opposition to U.S. intervention in Latin America.

In the face of this history, a reasonable U.S. reaction would be to accept Mexican policy for what it is and concentrate on those actions in the region that are most inimical to us. (In fact, Mexico, for its own reasons, has considerably modified its enthusiasm for the two factions we oppose.) Yet some officials in the U.S. government have been so annoyed at Mexico that they have brushed aside not only history lessons but those who would remind them of the complex and vitally important nature of relations with our southern neighbor.

Sober good judgment at the State Department, from the top right down through the ranks, has headed off any damage that might have resulted from active resentment and clumsy attempts to make Mexico change its policies—attempts that might actually harm that country's struggle for economic recovery, which is itself vital for U.S. interests.

It would be unfair and inaccurate to leave the impression that this administration is impervious to the contents of intelligence or that it habitually resists the advice of Foreign Service officers. Career people expect a new administration to have its own set of prejudices and biases, some of which they may share. This administration is trying to make up for what it believes has been past neglect of Soviet and Cuban influence in the Americas. While it asks East-West questions, another administration may ask North-South questions. The career officer can object only when the answers are required to fit the questioner's fancy.

Our intelligence is generally good enough. We know the problems each country faces: the difficulties caused by capital flows out of the region, for instance, or the threat of overpopulation. Our government can use more perceptive reports by curious-minded officers who, impatient with easy and trendy answers, can provide insights and speculations about the future, about individual countries and transnational movements, and about opportunities and perils.

In recent years, there has been a tendency for politicians to run against Washington and the federal government. This was done by both Presidents Carter and Reagan with astonishing success, considering that the government is supposed to be representative of the people. They also ran against the so-called establishment. The very word establishment causes indignation in some hearts. In these two campaigns it was intended as a slur on those who had gone before and now were presumably out of touch with the tides of history or had been willing to give away too much. To the extent that those who used these arguments came to believe them, the naivete in their attacks on the work of others revealed an ignorance about the severity of the world's problems. In their arrogance they overestimated their own talents.

One attempt to get informed advice on government policy was the establishment of the Kissinger commission to deliberate on Central America. A number of the commission's members, along with consultants and witnesses, were indeed among those who would be on anyone's list of the foreign affairs establishment. In appointing the group, the administration also hoped to get domestic support for what it would like to have accepted as its policy. It did not fully succeed in that, nor did it put all the advice of the commission into effect. But we should not decry either imperfect motives or imperfect results—good minds and serious people were brought together to consider a troublesome problem. The establishment proved itself useful.

If we cut ourselves off from the advice and help of those who have trod these same paths before, we will waste time wandering in well-mapped ideological thickets and falling into easy traps. Short on background, we will value zeal more than we do experience and cleverness more than wisdom. Rather than abhorring establishments, we should try to build them, not merely so they will endorse our actions or so we can achieve bipartisan agreements, but so our judgments will be enlightened by the counsel of weathered and disinterested minds. □